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Photo by ERB

One year ago, on 4 August 2011, a prominent Belarusian human rights defender, Vice President of FIDH, Chairman of the Human Rights Center "Viasna" and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Ales Bialiatsky, was sentenced to four and a half years of strict regime detention and the confiscation of his properties for allegedly "serious tax evasion". There is no doubt that the trial and sentence were aimed to punish his activities as a human rights defender.

Ales Biliatsky's courageous and consistent position in defending human rights in Belarus and around the world was internationally acclaimed and brought him many awards. In 2006, he was awarded the Prize of the Swedish Per Anger, the Prize for Freedom of Andrei Sakharov (by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee), and Homo Homini Award by People in Need.

In 2010, the Italian city of Genoa granted Ales Bialiatsky the title of Honorary Citizen

In 2011, the Human Rights Center "Viasna" under the chairmanship of Ales Bialiatsky was awarded the Atlantic Council of the United States Prize of Liberty.

In 2012, the US Department of State shared its 2011 Human Rights Defenders Award between Ales Bialiatsky and Uganda's Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Constitutional Law.

Since Ales' imprisonment, his colleagues, friends and supporters all over the world have launched campaigns of solidarity with him and his noble work.

Recently, a campaign was started on social networks. You can also join and express your solidarity with Ales Bialiatsky by adding a PicBadge on a profile picture or sending a letter of support to this address:

Ales Bialiatsky
Sikorskaha Street 1, Penal Colony 2, Unit 14
213807 Babruisk (Mahiliou Region)
Belarus

Main News

In late July Belarusian Foreign Minister Siarhei Martynau paid an official visit to Italy where he met with the president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Riccardo Migliori.
The meeting focused on the international observation of the parliamentary election that is scheduled for 23 September. Mr. Migliori expressed hope that the elections would "register significant progress on the democratic process and human rights with respect to recent elections in the country." Prior to his trip to Rome, Martynau participated in the European Union and Eastern Partnership foreign ministers meeting in Brussels. The presence of Belarusian Foreign Minister Martynau gave the EU an opportunity to convey its deep concern regarding the lack of respect for human rights, the rule of law and independent media in Belarus, Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy stressed the importance of the immediate release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners, of reversing the current repressive policies and of free and fair parliamentary elections in September.

The KGB obtained the right to ban more people from travelling abroad. The appropriate edict was signed by Aliaksandr Lukashenka at the beginning of July. Formerly, the KGB was entitled to place in the list only those who knew state secrets. All other entries were made by the interior, justice and defence ministries. A KGB spokesman explained that people may be placed on the KGB's preventive register on the grounds that they "may create a threat to the national security of the Republic of Belarus, cause damage to state or public interests, rights, liberties and legitimate interests of other people, or may lead to committing a crime afterwards." This move by the Belarusian authorities is considered a response towards the EU foreign travel ban and asset freeze for Belarusian officials and businessmen closely connected to the regime. A large number of people, including opposition politicians, journalists and human rights defenders, had been barred from travelling abroad already before the edict was signed.

Belarusian KGB has arrested Anton Surapin a 20-year-old student of Belarus State University's journalism school for publishing photographs of teddy bears that had been airdropped over Minsk on 4 July. The toys were pinned with press-freedom messages. He likely faces charges of "helping foreigners illegally enter Belarus." Presumably the charge refers not to the bears, but to the Swedes who say they dropped the toys from a private plane that illegally entered Belarusian airspace in order to protest restrictions of free speech under the government of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka. He could be sentenced to seven years in prison if convicted. At the same time the government of Belarus has denied that the teddy-bear incident ever happened, saying that the video released by the Swedes had been faked and that the whole thing was a "provocation." The Swedish public-relations firm Studio Total says it dropped 1,000 teddy bears carrying political slogans over the Belarusian town of Ivianets, near the Lithuanian border. To prove it they released a 90-minute video of the plane's flight from Lithuania. Speaking during the government session on 26 July, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka confirmed that a single-engine aircraft crossed the Belarusian border and warned that those found guilty in the incident should be punished. On 31 July, Chief of the Belarusian Air Defence and Air Force, as well as the country's top border guard were fired.

Belarus and Russia have signed a general agreement on construction of a nuclear power plant. The project, in the north-western town of Astravets near the Lithuanian border, should be built according to Russian construction plans using a $10 billion from Moscow. The first unit is expected to start generating power by November 2018, and the second unit by July 2020. The project has faced opposition from nearby Lithuania and environmentalist groups in Belarus. Lithuania itself is contracting Hitachi-GE to build at Visaginas (adjacent to Ignalina), while Russia is using its Kaliningrad territory between Lithuania and Poland to build a twin-reactor plant primarily for the export of electricity. Also nearby, Poland is advancing plans to build its first nuclear power plant by 2025.

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Editorial



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Tatiana Kouzina



Yaraslau Kryvoi

Belarusian news headlines over the last several weeks included the embarrassment inflicted by Swedes who dropped toys on Belarus with freedom of speech slogans, having flown over the border on a small aircraft. The Belarusian KGB subsequently arrested a young journalist who took pictures of the Swedish teddy bears. Russia continues to increase its influence in Belarus by extending a loan to Belarus which would enable Minsk to pay Russia for building a nuclear power plant in the north of Belarus.

In this issue of Belarus Headlines Stephan Malerius discusses the legacy of Vitali Silicki on pre-emptive authoritarianism. This issue also includes interviews with four Vitali Silicki fellows. Siarhei Bohdan explains how and why the Belarusian (and Russian) political leadership exploit the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany to reach their political ends. The issue also gives an overview of the Office for Democratic Belarus' activities, such as the competition of Belarusian school-teams "What do I know about Europe" and developments related to the Clearing House Initiative.

BISS analytical papers suggest that the pro-Russian tilt dominates Belarusian foreign policy despite some warming of Belarus relations with the West. Most recently Belarus authorities tried to avoid aggressive rhetoric against the West which was dominant in the past. Andrei Yeliseyeu concludes in his study that Schengen countries are more open to Belarus than any other EaP country.

Short summaries of Belarus Digest publications include articles on sex tourism, women's rights and privatisation, while Olga Loginova describes her trip to the lake Svitiaz' in central Belarus.

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News in Short

According to Belarus' Central Bank, the **foreign trade surplus in January-May increased up to $3 billion**. Exported goods and services were at 23.3 billion dollars, while imported goods reached only at 20.3 billion dollars. The foreign trade turnover amounted to 43.7 billion dollars. While the surplus of trade in goods developed by $ 1.7 billion, the trade in services reached only $1.3 billion. Foreign trade turnover of goods increased over the same period last year to 19.6% (while exports grew by 37.1%, imports - by 5.1%) and amounted to almost 39.8 billion dollars. The foreign trade turnover of services increased in comparison to January-May last year by 10.7% (exports increased by 15.4%, imports - by 2.3%) and amounted to 3.9 billion dollars.

World Bank experts have warned Belarus over its current economic model, claiming that the country`s economic growth cannot be sustained without structural reforms. Between 2001 and 2010, Belarus had a fairly high economic growth rate that averaged out at eight percent yearly, which allowed the country to reduce the share of the population living in poverty from 47 percent in 1999 to five percent in 2010. World Bank experts connect Belarus` high economic growth to, among other factors, cheap energy resources supplied by Russia, and estimates the mean annual level of Russia`s subsidies for Belarus in the period at over 13 percent of GDP. However Belarus has failed to take advantage of the subsidised energy resources to make its economy more competitive, which in turn has restricted opportunities to find new sources of growth. The World Bank urged Belarus to conduct structural reforms with a view to shifting more workforce and capital to high-productivity economic sectors, restructuring the government-controlled sector of the economy and increasing the share of private businesses and service providers in the economy. In WB opinion, it should help the country to revitalise its competitive economic sectors and discover unused opportunities for economic growth, as well as reduce the dependence on cheap energy resources from Russia.

The Belarusian Parliament approved a bill of amendments establishing administrative responsibility for non-licensed public opinion surveys. The fine would in particular be established for "illegal" polls asking people for their opinion about the political situation the country, a national referendum, or parliamentary and presidential elections. It would equal 20 base rates (about $240) for individuals and up to 100 base rates (about $1,200) for legal entities. Most analysts say that the amendments were approved in such a rapid way (the bill passed in the first reading) to prevent the execution of any opinion or exit pool ahead of the parliamentary election scheduled for 23 September this year.

Belarus has no intention of selling a controlling stake in the Belaruskali Fertilizer Company, due to its significance as a key source of budget revenue for the country. This sentiment was elucidated by Aliaksandr Lukashenka during his visit to the plant on 17 July. According to him, no controlling share package of Belaruskali can be sold. He only mentioned that 10-20-25 percent share portion could be considered at a price worth $8.5-9 billion. Last year, the leading Russian fertilizer producer, Uralkali, wanted to buy Belaruskali for $14 billion, however, the Belarusian government set the price at $30 billion and the deal fell apart. Lukashenka even threatened to review business relations with Russia-based Uralkali, a key shareholder in the Belarusian Potash Company, over concerns about the division of the company's sales. "All the issues concerning the Belarusian Potash Company must be resolved by 1 September, even if we will have to review relations with the Russian Uralkali," Lukashenka said while addressing the audience. The Belarusian Potash Company was established in 2004 and is an exclusive seller of the potash fertilizer produced by Belaruskali and Uralkali on the world market. The company's core shareholders are Belaruskali with 45 percent, the Belarusian Railway with five percent and Uralkali with 50 percent.

Three international resolutions on Belarus were adopted by different international bodies in the beginning of July. The European Parliament resolution was triggered by new accusations against Belarusian-Polish journalists Andrei Pachobut who had been arrested for criticising the President in his articles. (Mr. Pachobut was later released under the condition not to leave the country until the investigation is completed). The resolution recommended that EU member states consider another extension of sanctions against Belarusian officials and also called into question the further participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership initiative.

The United Nations' Human Rights Council voted to appoint a special investigator into accusations of torture and oppression of government critics in Belarus. The 47-nation council, voted to create the post, as proposed by the European Union, by 22 votes to 5, with 20 abstentions. Belarusian ambassador Mikhail Khvastou said his country would not recognise the mandate of the special investigator and would not cooperate with him.

And finally the OSCE Parliamentary resolution called on the Belarusian authorities to 'immediately and unconditionally release and rehabilitate all political prisoners'. The resolution also recommended the International Ice Hockey Federation to remove the 2014 World Championship from Minsk until all political prisoners are released.

In Memoriam

Vitali Silitski Fellowship: You Do What You Like Doing and You Enjoy It

By ODB



Photo from Maksim Karliuk archives

There could be no better way to honour the life and academic career of prominent Belarusian Vitali Silitski (1972-2011) than a fellowship for his fellow political analysts, researchers and countrymen.

Silitski was a ground-breaking representative of a new, post-Soviet generation of Belarusians: a talented political scientist, sociologist and publicist; ironic, and metaphoric, not always ready to meet the opponent halfway, direct, thoughtful and fair, a weighty figure in many ways.

Silitski studied in Minsk, Budapest, Washington D.C. and Stanford, authored and co-authored books and hundreds of publications on democratisation processes in the post-Soviet space, as well as electoral revolutions and the politics of economic reform. He headed the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, shaping it into the foremost think tank in the country. And he passed away too early.

After his unfortunate death in June 2011, BISS, in conjunction with several of its partners, came up with the idea of financial support for Belarusians students and researchers. Alumni of the Central European University in Hungary where Vitali completed his Masters' degree raised money to support a Belarusian student who was studying there at that time. The Institute of European Studies and International Relations of the Comenius University in Bratislava, with the help of the Slovak government (SlovakAid), offered a fellowship for six Belarusians to come over for a semester. With these initiatives running, BISS and its partners plan to come up with research fellowships for month-long internships in think-tanks around Europe.

Belarus Headlines **talked to the Vitali Silitski fellows of the Comenius University about their motivation to apply for it and their knowledge of the programme's namesake.**

MAKSIM KARLIUK: Vitali Silitski is a known Belarusian scholar and expert who has contributed a lot to elaborate the ways for the efficient future development of Belarus. It is important that there are more people who could share the same ideals and cooperate in this regard. The aim of the programme is to improve the skills, knowledge and qualifications of Belarusian students in the field of European integration, institutions and good governance. That's why it's particularly helpful.

My motivation to apply for the fellowship was multifaceted. First of all, I wanted to sharpen my knowledge of legal and administrative transitions of Central and Eastern European countries with a focus on approximation to EU law. Secondly, I wished to gain new skills to be able to apply this knowledge in Belarus. There is much to learn about the Slovak way, both in theory and practice, which could be adapted in Belarus, and this would be enhanced by exploring these elements in Slovakia. You can see how things work in practice, talk to people, from ordinary citizens to experts in relevant fields.

I myself got involved in a number of projects, doing my own research, consulting local experts, meeting representatives of think tanks and academia. I am also invited to speak at conferences and roundtables. Together with other fellows we met a number of people who are interested in Belarus; it's also on the agenda of the government, where we had a couple of meetings. The faculty at the Institute of European Studies at Comenius University has been very helpful in aiding my exploration of the opportunities mentioned.

And there are so many possibilities, and the five months of the fellowship are never enough.

What does your semester in Slovakia look like?

ANNA TALIARONAK: Our studying process here differs a little from the one in Belarus. First of all, we were given the opportunity to choose the subjects based on the scope of our interests and preferences, which was quite new for us. We could choose subjects we didn't study before or those which are not connected with our major, even something new in order to try, for example, Game theory or Global Challenges. Then, the lectures themselves are structured in a way that involve all the students in the group, sometimes provoking hot discussions, so you have no choice but to participate. Thirdly, as the classes were chosen, we could dedicate all the rest periods (for e.g. 3 from 7) to exploring Bratislava and networking with local and international students. I believe this has made an even stronger educational impact on us!

Another benefit of the programme is that our institute has a Slovak language course for international students, which helped us to adapt to Slovak life more quickly and feel at home here.

MARYIA HUSHCHA: Yeah, it's really great that we could choose any number of subjects from any faculty of the university. We had two weeks at the beginning of the semester to test-drive: basically, to attend as many lectures as possible to decide on the courses. As the scope of our interests concentrated mostly on political and social sciences, we ended up at the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences. And that was the right choice. During the semester it offered meetings with several well-known public persons from Slovakia and abroad, like the former Slovak Foreign Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, Distinguished Research Fellow of the Institute for National Strategic Studies, NDU Leo Michel. Some professors are not only high-qualified scholars but also officials from the public sector.

Another thing which I like about this programme is that it takes place in Bratislava. The city itself is wonderful and has an advantageous location. It takes few hours to get to Vienna, Budapest, or Prague from Bratislava. So during one semester we have visited three other European countries, and not just one.

How international is the university? Do you think it is important that there are Belarusians in the course on European studies?

ALENA KUDZKO: If you compare the international environment of Slovak universities to the most Western universities of the same size, Slovaks for sure have some space for improvement. However, the Erasmus programme and programmes of the Slovak Ministry of Education bring quite a lot of foreign students to Slovakia. And we shouldn't forget that it's an amazing country in the centre of Europe, which also makes it attractive for students from the European countries and many others, like Brazil, Somalia, Georgia, Ukraine and Russia.

But it's important to remember most students here have different goals. I wouldn't say that we are typical Belarusians. And we also know very well what we are doing in Slovakia: research, studies, social activities, meetings, etc., which makes us quite obviously different from the majority of foreign students who love parties and forget about classes a lot more often than we do! And I've got used to the fact that we are seen as representatives of our country and now the impression of the education system in Belarus is that it's very good and that young people are smart, active, and sociable. And we are happy with such a stereotype and have no intention to discredit it.

And yes, I think it is extremely important to have Belarusians in the European studies and international relations courses. Belarusians themselves learn a lot: we learn the things that we can barely get access to in Belarus, we study in a way, which is quite uncommon in Belarus, either. But at the same time, other students can learn from us much more than from books, media, or

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By ODB, Brussels

'conventional' Europeans. Most of the students have never seen a Belarusian themselves, or they've never talked to one closely.

Surprisingly, Belarus is quite a popular issue in Slovakia. I've travelled a lot, and my experience shows that Slovaks know much more about the situation in Belarus than people in most other countries. They show genuine interest. Of course, much of the information they receive is distorted by one extreme or the other: sometimes, all they know is some horror stories about life in Belarus. And we can depict the situation in more details as we know more than just the mass media stories about political repressions. Questions like "Do you have the Internet in Belarus?" are not infrequent, either.

Next, we, Belarusians, often publicly feel as if we were not heard, or Europe's decisions are not what we would expect. Studying in Europe, interacting with our peers is one of the best ways to ensure that people from other countries understand better what's going on in Belarus, are aware of our needs and can discuss with us mutually beneficial solutions.

And we shouldn't forget that Belarusians also have much to offer Europe. We are usually looked down on as people in need of help or guidance, but in fact, Belarusians are a wonderful intellectual asset to Europe, and Europe can benefit a lot from cooperating with us.

Would you advise Belarusian students to apply for the fellowship? For what reason?

ALENA AND MARYIA: Absolutely! First, living and studying abroad, in a new and challenging environment, does have a huge impact on the person, intellectually and otherwise.

Hence, there are so many interesting and unexpectedly amazing things in the places where we forget to look for them. When everyone tries to go to the USA, England, Germany, France, or Poland, we don't notice that the most interesting things happen in under-explored places. And Slovakia is one of them. Also, the Institute of European Studies and International Relations at Comenius University is a very respectable, high-quality school. And you get all the attention possible from the professors. In addition, the experience is not limited to classes and academic activities. There are meetings and possibilities to work with think tanks, NGOs, governmental officials; networks of professionals and peers. And Slovakia has had too much in common with the Belarusian situation to neglect its experience.

And finally, this fellowship is one where fun and professional success are intertwined. You do what you like doing and you enjoy it.

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Authoritarian Laboratory - The Case of BELARUS

By Stephan Malerius



Vitali Silitski and Stephan Malerius during BISS annual conference February 2010, Minsk. Photo by Dasha Buben.

Vitali Silitski was both a cool-headed thinker and analyst, and a very emotional and committed supporter of democracy. He was, intellectually and morally, one of the most sensitive people I knew. When we briefly met at the October Square on 19 December 2010, Vitali was obviously infected by the political momentum and the slim hope that things might change for the better in his country. Yet, his desperation was so much deeper the following day, after a horrible night of witch hunting and the total destruction of everything Vitali was hoping and working for.

Democratic, independent and European – this was Vitali's vision for Belarus, the country he loved. It was a positive obsession that made him tireless in writing his analyses and texts on busses, overnight trains and at airports while traveling from conferences to seminars, from workshops to briefings in the region and the whole world. Vitali was committed and devoted and at the same time precise and deliberate. He passed away when the country needed him most. Today, one year after his death, it is obvious that the hole he left in Belarus and in Europe is still painfully gaping. It is up to all of us to fill this void, to a small extent, by honoring Vitali's heritage and carrying on his mission and his ideas.

When referring to Belarus as the last dictatorship in Europe, Western journalists and politicians have in mind the fact that unlike many other authoritarian leaders in the post-communist world Lukashenka managed to survive not only the political turmoil of the 2003 – 2005 years with all its colored revolutions but also the local and global financial crises that followed. As for Lukashenka being the longest ruling president in the post-soviet space in Europe, there have only been rare attempts to explain this phenomenon that go beyond the dictatorship-label. Within his text "Preempting democracy: The case of Belarus"(1) Vitali Silitski presented one of the most intelligent analyses of the Lukashenka-system. The idea of preemption seems to come extremely close to the logic upon which this enigmatic regime secures its position. At the same time the text shows Silitski's deep understanding of authoritarian regimes in general and his incredible comprehension of the Lukashenka-system in particular. Although based on the analysis of Lukashenka's first decade, Silitski's idea of the preempting democracy model is still valid in 2012. I suppose, Silitski himself was extremely unhappy when he concluded that preemption could be seen as the mechanism that is ensuring Lukashenka's continued rule:

"Preemption serves as an instrument of maintaining both the stability of authoritarian rule and Lukashenka's image as a popularly elected leader. At the time of the 1996 referendum, when unchecked presidential rule was formalized, Lukashenka was highly popular, and he was doubtless capable of defeating the opposition in a fair confrontation. Lukashenka's policy of preemption changed the rules and laid the groundwork for infinite rule long before the autocrat became unpopular."

The added value of his approach lies in the fact that Silitski composes preemption not as an abstract theory but derives it from a very precise and comprehensive description of where the method was applied in social reality: Starting from elucidating the function of the constitutional referendums in 1995 and 1996 that led to the complete institutionalization of personalistic authoritarian rule in Belarus, "eliminated all meaningful political competition and evicted opposition from the decision-making process"(2) to a very condensed depiction of how Lukashenka took control over the social pluralism that still existed until 2002/2003; the closing or forced self-liquidation of NGOs, the muzzling of independent press, the complete indoctrination of the education system, the punishing of free and independent artistic expression and the introduction of the mandatory one-year contract system for state employees. When typifying the way the Lukashenka-system functions it becomes clear that preemption in Silitski's understanding is much less a mechanic instrument of guarding personal power or securing authoritarian ruling but a permanent and quite sophisticated analysis of complex social, internal political and international developments conducted by the regime and followed-up by an elaboration of measures that would anticipate and mitigate the potential negative influences of these developments for the ruling elite:

"Preemption targets political parties and players that are still weak. It removes from the political arena even those opposition leaders who are unlikely to pose a serious challenge in the next election. It attacks the independent press even if it reaches only small segments of the population. It destroys civil society organizations even when these are concentrated in a relatively circumscribed urban subculture."

It is remarkable that the mechanism that Silitski describes depends not on a certain period of Lukashenka's rule and is not tied to the installation,

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consolidation or the safeguarding of his authoritarian regime. Most of the preemptive measures were also effectively used by Lukashenka after 19 December 2010. The closing down of NGOs in 2003/2004 for example is echoed in the detention of Ales Bialiatsky and the attempt to liquidate the human rights organizations that most effectively supported the most suppressed during the aftermaths of the 2010 events. The suppression of the independent press in the mid 2000s finds its equivalent in the closing down of “Avtoradio” in January 2011. In spring 2011 the authorities reverted to the blacklist of artists banned from performing or being played on the radio, which already existed until 2008.
Preempting democracy means, according to Silitski, not only controlling and organizing the internal life of the country(3) but also reacting to developments outside. It is noteworthy how precisely Silitski shows the fine tuning of measures of the Lukashenka-regime that take into account external developments and their potential impact on the situation in Belarus. From the Serbian revolution Lukashenka learned that he would have to be highly suspicious of his own inner circle and punish any (potential) opposition inside the regime. This is an almost classic case of preemption and – if we think of the countless cases of temporary companions that were installed and removed from their position, starting from Navumau to Kuliashou – one of the core features Lukashenka has been applying until today.

The second lesson that Lukashenka learned from Milosevic’s downfall touches on the question of election observation. Silitski describes the whole arsenal of manipulative mechanisms that would serve to exclude any competitiveness in his 2001 presidential election: “The authorities … banned exit polls … the early voting mechanism … was used again ... the election commissions included no members of the opposition … vote counters would be seated with their backs turned to the observers … the election law contained no adequate provisions for fair balloting.” In addition in March 2006 activists of Partnerstva who wanted to organize an independent election observation network for the presidential election were arrested, imprisoned, and brought to trial. Again, Lukashenka’s preemption method worked. Since the liquidation of Partnerstva, nobody inside or outside the country has managed to build up an effective campaign of independent election observations.

In a similar fashion to Serbia in 2001, Silitski also interprets the Ukrainian elections in 2004 from the perspective of Lukashenka’s preemption-strategy: Under the subheading “Countering the Orange Revolution” Silitski describes how the events in Ukraine encouraged Lukashenka to extend and adopt his decade-long policy of preemption. One particular aspect that Silitski focused on, and that was probably developed following the events in neighboring Ukraine, was of utmost importance in December 2010 and the months of repressions that followed:

“In the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, and in preparation for the July 2006 presidential elections, Lukashenka has taken new preemptive measures … the use of new police tactics to disperse a few small demonstrations in early 2005 made it clear that the country’s security forces have been specially trained to stop street protests at their very start.”
Namely the reinforcement of security agencies (including the special role that Sheiman played when appointed head of the presidential administration in 2004 “to ensure that nothing similar to the Orange Revolution occurs in Belarus”).
One of the most intriguing parts in this extremely compact text is Silitski’s brief look to Russia where he discerns “a similar pattern of preemption” as he had described for Belarus. Although the examples that he quotes – Putin’s handling of independent media, the re-structuring of the upper house of the Russian parliament and new electoral rules discriminating independent parties in Russia – are closer to hints than a solid comparison, although the very idea is very smart. Despite Silitski’s prediction that Putin might intend “to follow Lukashenka’s path and continue his tenure beyond the expiration of his second term in 2008” proving to be untrue, the idea of Belarus serving as a kind of laboratory for other authoritarian states, in particular Russia, deserves a thorough analysis.

Though describing the development in Belarus from the moment Lukashenka came to power in 1994 until 2005 the preemption-model that Silitski proposes in his text, is probably the defining principle of how the Lukashenka-system was and still is functioning.

Another added value: Silitski is not speculating about the intentions of Lukashenka to become and stay president but is examining the methods employed in order to maintain the presidency for two decades.
“Preemption has an enormous psychological impact on both the political and social opposition; such systematized repression instills in them a sense of hopelessness and imposes the perception that political change is far beyond reach.”

All these facts were no surprise as they were – to one extent or the other – even expected. Silitski explains why they happened and defines the “regime-logic” behind it.

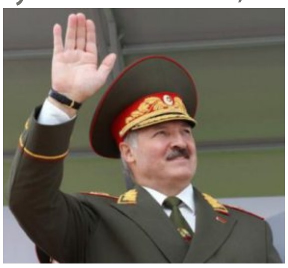
Silitski was an analyst, an academic, and although he was always willing to consult and advise he was not a “polit-technologist”. This was and still is one of the tragedies for Belarus: That there was nobody around who was able to transfer Vitali’s brilliant analysis into a concrete strategy that would have seriously challenged Lukashenka. It shows the uniqueness of Silitski but at the same time reveals why – together with Lukashenka’s preemptive measures – there was no chance for the rise of a credible and visible democratic alternative in Belarus.
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(1) Vitali Silitski, Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus, in: Journal of Democracy, 16 (2005) 4, S. 83-97. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jod/summary/v016/16.4silitski.html (29.05.2012).
(2) All quotations refer to the text indicated in footnote 1.
(3) In 2008/2009 Silitski was leading a project in which social contracts

Politics and Society

The Belarusian Regime as a Repercussion of the Second World War

By Siarhei Bohdan, Berlin


Photo by skandaly.ru

Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka regularly refers to the Second World War in his quarrels with the West. Lukashenka added to Soviet Victory Day, celebrated on 9 May, another official holiday on 3 July, the day when the Red Army took Minsk in 1944. In 2003 the government introduced the History of the Great Patriotic War as an obligatory and separate subject not only in schools but also at all universities.
The authorities have rebuilt the Stalin Fortification Line and bring their official foreign guests there. In Minsk, they are also building a new grand museum devoted to the war. Prof. Marples found out that as many as 1,500 book titles on WWII were published in Belarus between 2005 and 2010. "The Great Patriotic War" is the defining element of the national historical memory and the basis for the formation of modern collective identity in Belarus," emphasised David Marples.

Do Belarusian Victims Exist for the West?

The attitude to the role and suffering of Belarus elsewhere in Europe is different. Although only a fraction of Russian territory had been occupied by the Germans, they exploit their victory to the fullest extent possible even now. Belarus had been the main Nazi-Soviet battleground for years, but many in the West also prefer to label Belarusian territories and its people as "Russian". It may sound simpler to them, but to Belarusians this sounds unfair to say the least.

Today the Russian authorities exploit the Soviet victory in the war against Nazi Germany and neglect the fact that the war touched just a very small part of Russia proper. The war devastated the non-Russian lands of the Soviet Union and in particular Belarus, which saw the most fierce and prolonged fighting. No wonder, as Belarus was sandwiched between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in 1939. German troops occupied the land at the very beginning of the war and the Nazis held the Belarusian territory for three years.

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The Belarusian Regime as a Repercussion of the Second World War

By Siarhei Bohdan, Berlin

As a result, literally every Belarusian village saw at least some fighting at the beginning and end of the war. Many regions suffered as the frontline stayed there for many months, or partisan activities resulted in brutal collective punishment on behalf of the German administration. There is no Belarusian family which did not suffer in the war directly. This was certainly not the case in Russia, only a fraction of which was actually occupied.

However, even now, two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is common to hear or read in Russia and in the West the western territories of the USSR being called "Russian." No need to go far to see evidence of it.

The Berlin's Topography of Terror museum, located on the site of the former Nazi secret police Gestapo headquarters, demonstrates the unfortunate habit of many Western historians of labelling "Russian" anything to the east of Poland. These are hardly innocent typos, as Moscow continues to exploit the guilty conscience of Germans. On the other hand, in the latest 2012 documentary "Churchills größtes Spiel" produced by the major German channel ZDF, the Western Belarusian lands are simply always called "Eastern Poland" without any explanations.

The human losses in Belarus caused by the war were immense, but the exact extent is still a hotly disputed topic. A prominent leader of Soviet Belarus, Piatro Masherau, a former partisan himself, estimated that every fourth Belarusian died in the war. Lukashenka increased that number to every third.

Yet there is evidence that around 1.9 million Belarusians, or 20 per cent of the pre-war population of the land, perished in the war. 500,000-600,000 of them were killed in the Red Army in combat, and more than a million civilians were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. Most of those killed were Belarusian Jews and peasants exterminated in anti-guerrilla operations. The current regime is exploiting these massacres to erase the memory of the monstrous crimes of the Soviet totalitarianism from people's minds. It is not talking about the tragedy of Belarusians yet it is striving to continue the Soviet tradition to seek absolute heroes and absolute villains.

Guerrilla Land

Myths related to the Second World War were at the core of Soviet Belarusian ideology. The local Communist party presented the land as a "guerrilla country". It was a safe form of Belarusian nationalism: it allowed them to portray Belarusians as heroes but it did not lead to a confrontation with the painful issues of Soviet policies carried out in Belarus.

The guerrilla warfare in Belarus did not inflict many military losses but caused immense civilian losses. Ultimately, it became an internal confrontation as Belarusians fought both for Soviet partisan groups and pro-German police and military units. For many of them it was not a free choice but rather a choice between the Gulag and the Buchenwald. Even the father of the most loyal to the Communist party, Belarusian poet Arkadz' Kuliashou, became a village head under German occupation while his son continued Bolshevik propaganda on the Soviet side.

People in western Belarus in particular had no sympathy for Moscow because they became Soviet citizens only in 1939, after Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union divided Europe in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Therefore, one of the most famous Belarusian writers, Vasil Bykau, himself a veteran, described the Second World War not as an epic patriotic struggle but as a huge existential tragedy for every Belarusian.

Many questions remain unanswered about "partisan" Belarus. No doubt Belarusian partisans were more successful in their operations than their counterparts in other countries. Belarusian partisans fought under much harsher conditions than the Yugoslav fighters of Tito because Belarus itself – unlike the Balkans – was crucial to the German war effort.

Only in the eastern regions which had been part of the Soviet Union since the 1917 October Revolution was there a wide-scale indigenous guerrilla movement, albeit with strong control from Moscow. In the western half of Belarus – until September 1939 under Polish administration – the Germans had to deal mostly with partisans which were sent or parachuted from Soviet-controlled areas, who were effective and well-trained commandos.

The Hot Issue of the Second World War

The Belarusian history of the Second World War hides yet another skeleton in the closet - people who cooperated with the German administration in Belarus. There were very few, if any, true supporters of the Nazis. This can be seen clearly by the lack of support for the massacres of Jews in Belarus. The Nazis themselves complained that the Belarusians, unlike other European nations, were not enthusiastic about their anti-Jewish policies.

But many people were willing to ally with anyone struggling against the Stalinist regime. And when late in the winter of 1944 the Nazis permitted the organisation of the Belarusian Land Defence Forces, tens of thousands of people joined that army. It was a very impressive number as the mobilisation took place only in Central and North-Western Belarus.

Those people began to cooperate with the Germans, ready to fight against the return of the Stalinist terror. They were poorly armed and the Germans had no trust in them and never used them on the front lines. These battle units, later repeatedly reorganised, led to the eventual formation of a Belarusian SS Division which did not participate in any massacres. The Nazi leadership decided to send them to fight in Western Europe and as soon as they had a chance most of them joined the French resistance. Their fate symbolises the tragic choice between bad and worse faced by Belarusians in that war.

Today Belarusians have almost no anti-German or anti-Western sentiments. Belarusian writer Siarhiej Dubaviec noted that all opinion surveys show Germany as the favourite country for emigration among Belarusians, despite all the official glorification of the Soviet anti-Nazi struggle in 1941-45.

Soviet Belarus had no relations of its own with the rest of Europe to discuss their common history. Independent Belarus very soon returned to the old Soviet ideology which considered the history of the Second World War as a compelling argument to support confrontation with the West.

The war remains an issue for Belarusians, including those who are sceptical of official propaganda. A major Belarusian publisher once admitted that all books on the last war, even specialized scholarly titles, sell better than any other books.

Belarus and Germany should address their history, acknowledge the facts of Belarusian suffering and the contradictions in Belarusian attitudes towards the German occupation. Yet, the current government of Belarus will never do so as it undermines its raison d'etre.

But Germany as a democratic European state must do so. And they should work with Belarusian society directly and give it still further grounds to challenge the anti-Western rhetoric of the regime. After all, Lukashenka's rule itself is also a late repercussion of that war which destroyed Belarus unlike no other European country and left Belarusians severely traumatised for decades. Even in the 1990s, the common justification for accepting the dictatorship sounded like - "let it be anything but war."

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Current Activities Update

Prepared by ODB, Brussels

Belarus: Stable Instability? Belarusian Experts Discuss the Situation in Washington



Photo by carnegieendowment.org

On June 18, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Washington) hosted a discussion of the current situation in Belarus with Tatiana Kouzina of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS), Siarhei Satsuk of *Ezhednevnik*, the first Belarusian electronic newspaper, and Olga Stuzhinskaya of the Office for a Democratic Belarus to honour the memory of BISS' first Director, Vitali Silitski, who passed away a year ago. Belarusian experts provided a general overview of the political and economic situation in the country, putting particular emphasis on Russia's economic influence and the first results of Belarus' new engagement with the Customs Union. The latest trends in Belarus' civil society development were presented by Olga Stuzhinskaya who stressed the need for long-term investment to aid domestic "forces of change" with more efforts concentrated on the projects that would help to keep people in the country, encourage them to work on changing their own environment, and make them responsible for its future. Several overarching themes visible in Silitski's writings and his ideas, such as pre-emptive authoritarianism, and social contracting between the people and the authorities were also discussed during the meeting.

The expert gathering in Washington was possible thanks to kind support of PACT/ USAID. For more information, please visit carnegieendowment.org

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Belarusian School-Team from Brest to Visit Brussels



Photo by democraticbelarus.eu

On June 27, the school contest "What do I know about Europe" ended with its final stage competition that was hosted by the Swedish embassy in Vilnius, Lithuania. The Office for a Democratic Belarus was among the organisers and co-sponsors of the event. The team of school pupils from Brest, who won the 2012 contest, will be visiting Brussels on the invitation of our Office.

The contest has its roots back in 2004 and is built on a series of competition events for high school children where they are required to demonstrate knowledge in the history, culture and geography of the European continent with Belarus being part of it. Participating teams come from different parts of the country. Each includes five students and a supervisor.

This year, fourteen teams took part in the semi-finals of the competition in different cities of Belarus. Three of them made it to the final session in Vilnius – from Brest, Maladzechna and Mahiliou.

The Office for a Democratic Belarus took part in this project for the first time this year as part of the organizing committee and provider of the prize for the winners' team. During the three-day visit to the capital of the EU – Brussels – children from Brest will see with their own eyes the EU institutions and hear about the role they play and how decisions are being made there. A cultural programme will include a tour of Brussels and a visit to one of its museums.

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Olga Stuzhinskaya Meets with EuroClub in Hrodna



Photo by democraticbelarus.eu

Director of the Office for a Democratic Belarus (ODB), Olga Stuzhinskaya, participated in the European Club (EuroClub) session that took part in the Belarusian city of Hrodna. The audience representing local civil society organisations, journalists, students and other interested parties was deeply engaged with the debate on the current state of EU-Belarus relations, the visa liberalisation for EaP countries in general and for Belarusian citizens in particular. Stuzhinskya concentrated on the steps necessary: required for Belarusian authorities to foster visa facilitation and visa liberalisation processes. She also briefed the audience on the projects her Office is implementing in Brussels and Belarus, namely the Clearing House, which is intended to build the organisational capacity of Belarusian CSOs and enhance their cooperation and coordination with the European Union, European donors and international implementers. The second big project is the 'EU and Belarus Sharing Knowledge', designed to help Belarusian experts in different areas to establish contacts with their counterparts from the EU, learn about the experience of other countries of the Eastern Partnership and share their knowledge and best practices.

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(1) The European Club is a platform for promotion of European values in Belarus that unites those wishing to learn more about Europe, its values and standards and how these standards could be applied in modern Belarus.

Clearing House Opens its Doors for Small and Medium Business Associations



Photo by OEEC

On July 20, a thematic group meeting on small and medium businesses under the Clearing House Initiative took place in Minsk. Around 20 organisations learned about opportunities that the EU and other international donors suggest to Belarus, as well as about counselling and other services available under the Clearing House Initiative. During the meeting, two invited experts, Zhana Tarasevich of Business Association of Entrepreneurs and Employers and Valery Fadzejeu of International Finance Corporation told the audience about the main problems and challenges for the sector, engaging all participants in a fruitful discussion. By the end of the meeting the participants were able to elaborate several recommendations on fine-tuning the existing EU programmes for Belarus to make them more responsive to the real needs of the sector.



Photo by democraticbelarus.eu

Another opportunity to learn more about different European Programmes for Belarus civil society organisations, religious associations, social workers and volunteers received in the frames of the seminar that took place in Zhyrovichy Abbey premises earlier this month. During this event the Office for European Expertise and Communications presented its work and advertised its services. The seminar was attended by more than 100 participants.

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Most Popular on Belarus Digest

Prepared by Yaraslau Kryvoi, London

BelarusDigest


Cheslau Shulha, Deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism

Sex Tours Save The Belarusian Tourist Industry by Yauheni Preiherman

The article discusses the recent remarks of Belarus' deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism about the growing sex industry in Belarus on a state TV channel. While the Belarusian authorities are talking about the prospects of sex tourism, the inflow of foreign tourists to Belarus remains low. Belarus mostly attracts Russian citizens who come to rest at health resorts or gamble in casinos. Western tourists are still very rare. They do not want to pay for expensive visas only to find the lack of appropriate tourist infrastructure.



Time To Boost Belarus' Fallow Female Potential by Volha Charnysh & Nadine Lashuk

The article focuses on public perception of gender roles in Belarus. While Western countries recognized the potential of working women years ago, and are striving to gain from this potential work force of women for their economies, Belarus is not following the same route. Instead of aspiring to leading positions, women in Belarus aim for marriage and children as soon as possible after graduation. The authors conclude that Belarusian women should be able to determine whether they want to have brilliant careers or to stay at home and enjoy the company of their children. They hope that their ability to make this choice will be supported both by the authorities and by Belarusian society at large.



Swedes Bomb Belarus With Toys by Volha Charnysh

On 4 July, Swedish amateur pilots penetrated Belarus' airspace according to an email received by Belarus Digest. Their small aircraft crossed the Lithuanian-Belarusian border and parachuted hundreds of teddy-bears with notes of support for freedom of speech. Covered by some Belarusian and Swedish media, but denied by the Belarusian authorities, the flight has generated more publicity than some of the pro-democracy initiatives by civil society groups and the EU in Belarus.

The brave flight should serve as an inspiration not only to Belarusians, but also to other Europeans. Europe should follow the Swedish example – of course, not by undertaking similarly dangerous stunts, but by taking action and addressing the Belarusian people directly instead of wasting time on endless high-level talks about sanctions. Only then will the Belarusian people start feeling that their Western neighbours are not indifferent to their difficult lives in Belarus.



The European Myth of Belarusian Socialism by Siarhei Bohdan

The article looks into the myth of Belarusian socialism, in which even some reputable Western parties believe. In the past, the European Left has also expressed solidarity with the Belarusian government on a national level in some European countries, including Germany. Many of them believe that the Belarusian regime shares their ideology.

The author explains that as a matter of fact the Belarusian regime is characterized by a self-interested opportunistic authoritarianism, which has no stable ideological preferences. Lukashenka has much more in common with Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and Asian despots than with Fidel Castro or leftist Latin American rulers.



Belarusian Privatisation And The Future Of BelarusKali by George Plaschinsky

On 22 June the Belarusian president asked PM Mikhail Miasnikovich to tackle inflation and ensure that the country's average salary would reach $500 by the end of the year. The article suggests that it is not the right time to share oil revenues with the population when the authorities badly need free money to repay their foreign debt and modernise the economy.

The Belarusian leadership understands that reforms are inevitable, but they fear radical change of the existing system of power and redistribution in the hope of maintaining the status quo with the help of Russian subsidies. But the more loans that are taken and reforms protracted, the more money will be needed to change direction and get on the right track. Russian businessmen are waiting with impatience for Lukashenka to announce that socialism is over and the sale of state property is open.


Pavel Daneyka

Who Benefits From European Sanctions Against Belarus? by Pavel Daneika

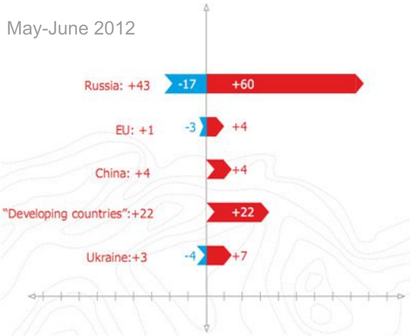
The introduction and possible expansion of the European sanctions on Belarusian business will turn Russian companies into practically the exclusive participants of the privatisation process in Belarus. The article argues that privatisation in which only large Russian companies participate, actually means absence of competition. That may result in some serious problems. First, the possibility of an uncontested sale automatically reduces the cost of Belarusian assets. Secondly, without competition it is impossible to choose on a competitive basis the most efficient investor, which will bring not only money, but also new production and management know-how. Therefore, from an economic viewpoint, the European economic sanctions contradict the national interests of Belarus and its European future.

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Research

In this section the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies and the Agency for Policy Expertise present a digest of their new studies, publications and expert opinions on the most burning issues of political, economic, and social life in Belarus.

Belarus Has Come Back to Restoring Multi-Vector Foreign Policy



For the first time in months, all monitored foreign policy indices are in the positive zone

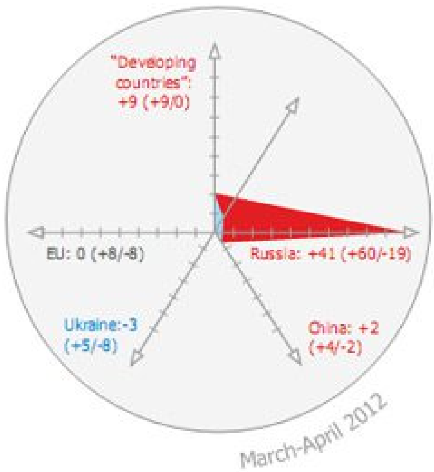
BISS foreign policy monitoring shows that Belarus has resumed its efforts to restore the true multi-vector character of its foreign policy endeavor and has sharply intensified relations with "developing nations" amid the previously outlined trend towards a deeper integration with Russia and "frozen" relations with the European Union. At the same time, Belarus' relationships with China and Ukraine showed certain improvements compared with the previous BFPI issue, reaching their normal level.

Minsk has resumed its attempts to get back to balancing behavior, trying to make use of China instead of the European Union this time in order to essentially cause a clash between China and Russia and draw maximum benefits. The Belarusian administration in May and June shifted its focus to giving a new impetus to the economic collaboration with Chinese companies.

The period under review saw a considerable relaxation of **Belarus-Ukraine** tensions in trade relations. The Minister of Economic Development Poroshenko, who has personal business interests in Belarus, played a positive role in this process. The final days of June saw indications of a possible thaw in political relations, possibly a personal meeting between presidents A. Lukashenka and V. Yanukovych.

The Russian vector continues to dominate in Belarus' foreign policy structure. Belarus' political and economic dependence on Russia is increasing; the country follows Russia's foreign policy priorities and is gradually accepting the terms imposed by the Russian side. Meanwhile, one should note that the current serenity of Russian-Belarusian relations masks the maturing of serious discrepancies, which, until the time comes, are neutralized by the need for Moscow to demonstrate the impressive progress of its integration crusade. They will immediately manifest, though, once the international situation and the Russian domestic political climate change.

Although a new parliamentary campaign has started and the election keeps getting higher on the agenda for Belarusian-European relations, one should not expect any landmark events in the **Belarusian-European relationship** over the short term. There could be some surprise developments, though, but only if the Council of the European Union passes new restrictive measures against Belarusian persons or companies, or if new conflicts with Russia arise.



Experts assume that the elections will fall short of the accepted standards for free and democratic elections and will not be recognized by the European Union. However, when preparing for the elections, the authorities will likely avoid reasons for criticism and make indications of possible positive changes in the future or even the possibility of pleasant "surprises" for the EU as early as this fall (for instance, a couple of oppositionists may be allowed to the lower house). These promises will hardly boost expectations of EU officials, but contacts with the Union at various levels may grow stronger during the next review period.

Minsk still exercises caution in the **Near East** having minimized its engagement with the region. The Foreign Ministry has refrained from openly supporting the Syrian government. Contacts with Iran have been minimized as well, and even these minor contacts are not made public. The temporary retreat in the Near Eastern front is offset by redoubled efforts to promote ties in other focus areas. Specifically, during the last 12-24 months, Belarus stepped up its work with **Southeast and South Asia**. Lukashenka's tour of **Latin America** indeed put an end to the standstill in relations with that region.

The full version of the Foreign policy index research in English in PDF and HTML is available on BISS website

Belarusian Yearbook-2011: Isolation and Crisis



The work on the 8th version of the Belarusian Yearbook was assisted by independent analysts and experts, as well as professionals of numerous think tanks. The authors argue that the country has not yet reached the point of no return on its way to losing sovereignty, but the threat of losing it is extremely high.
The 2011 crisis as the definite proof of the "Belarusian model" reaching its "breaking point" has caused the Belarusian authorities to make a choice between deep transformations of the socioeconomic model and vesting the responsibility for the state into external partners. By failing to make this choice, the Belarusian authorities were trying to go on with their policy in order to keep the state administration intact.

As a result, the socioeconomic model had collapsed by mid-2012, while some important state functions were eventually transferred to the only foreign partner, the Russian Federation.

Key trends of the year 2011 include:
- The "narrowing of the state," the trend originally outlined in 2010 that manifests itself in the concentration of decision-making authority to an increasingly narrow group of people that are not responsible for the implementation of their decisions;
- Institutional transformation: a "second" government was formed out of security agencies amid the unwinding crisis of the state administration at the level of the "first" government, National Bank and the Presidential Administration;
- Crisis of state policy as a whole, manifested in the inability of the ruling class to further pursue the program of reforms;
- Credibility crisis in the broadest sense possible;
- Intensive suppression of any form of protest and, on a broader scale, political activism, by the authorities;
- Increasing political isolation of Belarus amid the growing dependence on Russia, the only economic and political creditor;
- Financial crisis as painful deliverance from the accumulated macroeconomic imbalances;
- Belarus, an active consumer of credit resources, finished the year having vague prospects for repaying previous loans and taking new ones.

The authors of Belarusian Yearbook-2011 presume that all of the trends observed in 2011 have continued into 2012.

The full version of the Belarusian Yearbook-2011 in English is available on BISS website, Russian/Belarusian version is also available in *HTML*

Research

Schengen Countries Are More Open to Belarus Than Any Other EaP Country


Photo by t-styl.info

Relative visa statistics show that Belarus is leading among the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia in regards to the most important visa parameters

In the paper "How isolated is Belarus? Analysis of Schengen countries' consular statistics (2007- 2011)" BISS analyst Andrei Yeliseyeu investigates the dynamics of the visa issuance rates and visa parameters in the consulates of the Schengen countries in 2007–2011.

The findings show that in per capita terms Belarus is leading among the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia with respect to all the three examined parameters:

- the total number of the short-stay Schengen visas;
- the multiple-entry Schengen visas;
- the number of the national long-stay visas.

Judging by a number of the comparative visa issuance parameters, the Schengen countries are to a greater extent open for the citizens of Belarus, than for the residents of the other member countries of the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, the Ukraine) and Russia. After Serbia and Macedonia were included in the category of the countries whose citizens do not need visas for their short-stay visits to the Schengen states, Belarus, since 2010, has moved to the first place in the world in regard to the number of Schengen visas obtained per capita.

Rates of visas issued by Schengen states in Eastern Partnership countries and in Russia

Country	Short-stay Schengen visas per 1,000 people	Multiple-entry Schengen visas per 1,000 people	National long-stay Schengen visas per 1,000 people
Azerbaijan	4.5	0.8	0.1
Armenia	11.2	1.7	0.3
Belarus	61.0	27.6	5.9
Georgia	13.2	3.4	0.6
Moldova	14.0	3.3	4.0
Russia	36.0	17.1	0.2
Ukraine	24.2	8.9	3.4

Other key findings of the research include:

- The sharp decline in the number of visas issued for the citizens of Belarus, as a result of the inclusion of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to the Schengen area in late 2007, has been bridged. As a consequence of the sustainable increase in the numbers of visas issued by the consulates of the EU countries in 2008, the level of 2007 was almost reached in 2011.
- The visa issuance rates are improving not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively: in the 2010 – 2011 the percentage of visa refusals decreased, while the percentage of the multiple-entry Schengen visas issued increased in almost all the consulates of the Schengen countries. The Consulates of Lithuania and Poland have a strong lead in all of the parameters, which indicates that the political attitudes of the governments of these countries influence their consulates' activities.
- The percentage of the negative Schengen visa decisions taken by the Consulates of the EU countries in Belarus is extremely low for the region and is one of the lowest in the world. In 2011, the percentage of visa denials among the non-Schengen countries, having at least two consulates of the EU countries on their territory, was lower only in two states – Oman and Trinidad and Tobago.

The full version of this research in English is available on BISS website

BISS Trends: Quarterly Report On Five Major Trends Is Published

No considerable shifts in socio-political, economic or cultural life, the quarterly report notes.

Experts argue that in April – June 2012 the degree of repression and limitations on the freedoms of association and assembly never went down. Therefore, despite a certain thaw in Belarus' relations with the European Union, the situation remains unchanged in the *political democratization/political liberalization* segment, i.e. stagnation goes on. The looming election campaign has not caused any quality breakthrough in the scale of repression. At the same time, the expectations that more political prisoners would be let go after presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau was released never eventuated.

In the *economic sector*, the keynote for the quarter was the vector of the monetary policy pendulum – whether the government will ease its harsh policy or keep the things as they are, so that enterprises will have to get used to operating amid budgetary restraints. What we observe now is the choice of the latter option, which is why the quarterly liberalization trend is assessed as "minimum progress." On the other hand, the authorities have given up on the old approach to privatization processes, sliding back to a less transparent and much slower method. The unique opportunity to liberalize prices while avoiding a price hike was missed as well.

In the *quality of governance and rule of law* section, no change is recorded. The "control manual" of the economy remains; critical decisions are passed as decrees and ordinances of the president and the official mass media seem to have forgotten liberalization rhetoric.

Geopolitically, there is an obvious imbalance in Belarus' foreign policy, which is biased towards Russia, while relations with the European Union remain consistently poor. The return to the old habitual subsidies scheme for Belarusian-Russian relations enables Minsk to defy the conditions that the EU lays down to improve mutual relations. At the same time, the Belarusian authorities had appreciably narrowed their anti-Western rhetoric in official statements and the media by the end of the previous quarter. The sources of potential conflicts in Belarusian-Russian relations are obvious; however, negative trends have been blocked so far by the important status of the Eurasian Union project on Russia's agenda.

Finally, despite some positive developments, the *culture trend* keeps demonstrating the continuous politicization and ideologisation of culture life, as well as the polarization of the cultural sector of Belarus and depreciation of cultural products that constitute the official discourse.

The full version of the report in English in PDF and HTML is available on BISS website

Unknown-Belarus

A Farmstead with a View

By Olga Loginova, New York



Photo: lucynka.org

Enough, enough of the hot and muggy City, with its frantic pace, erratic drivers and hateful neighbors! Back to the lush forests, lakes full of fish, and fields bursting with color and life!

A Belarusian village, what can be more sentimental and dear for those, who still remember the rich smell of bread in their granny's brick oven, early starts to catch big fish, ripe cherries from the farm yards, and the dome of the sky heavy with stars that seemed ready to fall but never quite do.

Ironically, we came to the farmstead 'Golden Horse Shoe' (the Hrodna Region) in the middle of winter, when all the roads to the legendary lake Svitiaz' were covered by several feet of snow. The forged lace of the gates, the fanciful weathercock, and masterfully carved wooden blinds, all indicated that our hosts were far from being ordinary village business men.

Alena and Ales Pirazeus met by the Black Sea. She was an art teacher, and he, ten years younger, with an impressive moustache and strong weathered face, a local blacksmith. They fell in love, got married and built their cabin right on the water front.

The war in Abkhazia threatened their pastoral idyll, but necessity is the mother of invention. Alena, a native Belarusian, suddenly recalled a poem by **Adam Mitskevich**, in which the poet described the wonders of the mysterious and beautiful **lake Svitiaz'**.

Being not only an artist, but also a smart woman, Alena did some extensive internet research and discovered the fabulous low interest loans that Belarusian banks were offering to businessmen involved in ecological agro tourism.

Without further ado, Alena and Ales sold the cabin by the sea, packed their belongings and came to live and prosper by the shore of Svitiaz'.

Alena Pirazeva, a petite woman with a soft voice and bliss in her bright eyes, showed us their property. 'Everything you see we made with our own hands. First we built two cottages, and now we are working on the third one. One of the cottages has three bedrooms, a kitchen and a full bathroom. The second one, we call it a hunter's cabin, is just for a short stay, there is only one bed and a cold shower in it. I do all the painting and embroidery, Ales is the main constructor, he also works at his smith's shop. Our guests are so delighted, when he presents them with tiny horse shoes, or iron roses'.

Ales Pirazeu, who we found in his shop, is indeed an impressive figure with a heavy hammer, and flames of fire casting fancy shadows on his face. 'There is always something to be done here: to shoe a horse, or make a gate; people from the surrounding villages appreciate my skill, and those who come for a stay simply enjoy my performance'.

Despite the growing number of similar tourist farmsteads, the Pirazeus do not worry about their clientele. The proximity of the legendary lake and the local centre, Navahrudak, coupled with forests full of mushroom and berries, BBQ sites, master-classes in embroidery and ironworks conducted by the talented couple, as well as the comparatively low price of living there (11 dollars for a night) are sufficient attractions for visitors to support their household.

Ales Bely, the owner of another popular farmstead 'Marcinava Gus' (Marcin's Goose) in Liucinka village, Minsk Region, has his own success story. A professional historian, he is an author of multiple studies on Belarusian traditions and cuisine. Recently he published a book 'Nasha Strava' /' The Belarusian Cookbook, which is a fantastic resource for real foodies and Belarus lovers. And of course most of the dishes described in the book are cooked and served at his farmstead.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Bely's fans come here if only to try *zrazy* with dry fruit, buckwheat pancakes with cottage cheese, or Duke Tyshkevitch's *pirahi.* But the specialty dishes, as the name of the cottage suggests, are made from goose meat, which is always served on St. Martin's Day, November, 11th.

Being a very sophisticated mind, Ales Bely, not only called his business project by the name of its patron, but also encrypted the name of the famous Belarusian playwright **Vincent Dunin-Martsinkevich**, who was born in this village Liucinka about two hundred years ago.

The most valued customers at Martin's Goose Farmstead are intellectuals interested not only in procrastination, but in the cultural and historical experience. The essential part of the stay at the farmstead are the historic routes, celebrating national holidays and cuisine, master-classes in traditional arts and crafts, as well as visiting the famous National Park **'Nalibockaya Pushcha'**.

Among other advantages of Marcin's Goose is its appeal to foreigners. Being a graduate of Kingston Business School, Ales Bely speaks fluent English, which is still quite a rare talent among farmstead hosts.

According to a recent study conducted by the Ministry of Tourism less than one percent of almost one hundred fifty thousand tourists who stayed in about 1800 farmsteads in Belarus last year came from Western Europe or other non-Russian speaking countries. The largest shares of visitors were Belarusians, Russians and citizens from other former Soviet Republics.

The language barrier is not the only obstacle that keeps guests from rural recreations. The biggest issue is the disparity between service and price, and the misunderstanding of what 'authenticity' means to hosts and their guests. For instance if hosts sparingly mention their outside amenities on the website, and guests come in the anticipation of a hot tub under a starry sky, only to find a smelly wooden equivalent of a Little John hidden behind the bushes of lilac, that's definitely a ooooups.

To put a word in defense of monolingual Spartan Belarusian hosts it is important to mention that agro tourism is still quite an experimental terrain for us. It has only been six years since the Presidential Decree on Agro Tourism described the principles and stated the terms of how this business should be run.

And since then it has gone a long way. Today a guest can choose from an array of farmsteads, from very rustic and cheap cabins with the above mentioned comforts, to sophisticated fully furnished and internet connected modern cottages with three meals a day and animation programmes.

Most farmsteads are available for weekends, holidays or special events; the busiest time being the summer, and around the New Year's Eve. The best way to book your stay is by phone or via the email provided on the farmsteads' websites. And don't get discouraged, if you cannot get the first farmstead you choose, try again, because it is worth it! Been there, done that!

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In Fact

Lake Svitiaz' is a forest lake in Western Belarus. It has an almost perfect round shape and no connection to any other lake. Not a single river or spring flows into it and only one flows out. Despite this fact the water level in the lake has remain unchanged for centuries and has been attracting many geologists, archaeologists and ordinary adventure- seekers to its shores, to raise more questions than they have answered. It even somehow managed to preserve in its waters a plant called tetradinium Javanese, which apart from this lake can be found only in Indonesia. The water itself is extremely transparent and has a sweet taste. It is extremely popular with tourists and is part of a governmentally protected area. The lakes vicinity is extremely beautiful in spring when all its plants are blooming. The locals say those plants once were a medieval town's dwellers. According to the legends the town collectively went under water to protect itself from enemies. But this is a story for another article which will appear in one of the next issues of Belarus Headlines.

Nalibockaya Pushcha is the largest forest in Belarus whose territory three times exceeds the territory of Andorra. In different periods of Belarusian history *Nalibockaya Pushcha* with its dense thickets of trees and almost impassable swamps served as a natural protection from different enemy troops. During World War II it became a cover for numerous guerrilla groups including *Armia Krajowa*, as well as for the so called "Jerusalem in the Forest" – a Jewish resistance camp organised by the Belskys brothers. Thanks to the infertility of the local soils in terms of agricultural production, the Great Forest of Belarus managed to preserve itself almost untouched next to highly populated areas. Today it remains a home for numerous plant and animal spices many of which are listed in the Red Book. However *Nalibockaya Pushcha* failed to obtain the status of National Park and many believe this happened due to its reputation for being a hunting land.

Vincent Dunin-Martsinkevich – is a Belarusian play-writer, poet and theatre critic, who is considered the father of the Belarusian theatre. Having started to write in Belarusian he faced the problem of an absence of standardised dictionaries and grammar books. However he soon found himself even translating his famous countryman Adam Mitskevich's poems into his mother tongue. Dunin-Martsinkevich was the first author in Belarusian literature that started a story as a genre and also started to verse stories.

Belarus Headlines is a joint project of the Office for Democratic Belarus, Belarus Digest and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. More information about these organisations can be found on their web pages.

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